

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 010

PS 014 462

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TITLE The Future: Concept and Contradiction.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children (Philadelphia, PA, May 11-12, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Child Advocacy; *Childhood Attitudes; *Children; *Concept Formation; Emotional Response; *Nuclear Warfare; Socialization; *Time
IDENTIFIERS Future Cognition

ABSTRACT

Children's developing concept of time is important in socialization, but a contradiction is implied in asking children to educate themselves for the future when both children and adults are aware of the threat of nuclear annihilation. The development of time concepts can be traced through infancy, preschool, elementary school and adolescence, and children must learn time concepts in order to learn to control impulses, to endure frustration, and to plan and establish personal relationships. Research by Escalona and others shows that knowledge of the possibility of nuclear annihilation negatively affects children's planning for the future and their relationships with adults. Adults should therefore show their concern about the nuclear issue. (CB)

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The Future: Concept and Contradiction

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There are as few neutral ways to talk about the future as there are to talk about children, the two big words in the theme of this annual conference. Hopes, ambitions, threats, dreads, expectations, all address themselves to the future. For adults, children are a commitment to the future. For children, adults are representatives and guarantors of the future. In this article, I have chosen to look at the term future from two points of view: the perspective of child development and the socio-political point of view that belongs uniquely to our own current period in history.

Those of us who live and work with children, as teachers, parents, or friends, experience repeatedly -- with both surprise and dismay -- what a remarkably different time-world children live in. Communication between adults and children often flounders on their divergent understanding of the concept of time. The younger the children are, of course, the more immediate is their time perspective. Two year olds often seem to act as if there were only two kinds of time, "now" and "Not now." "Not now" is usually exactly the same as "never." An undeveloped grasp of time is the essence of the toddler's difficulty with waiting, postponing, taking turns, or believing that "mommy will be back soon." Sometimes three year olds fool us because they have acquired some of the vocabulary of time: "pretty soon," "later," "twenty minutes," "tomorrow." But the conceptual basis for having this understanding influence their

PS 014462

behavior remains unformed and confused. Fours and fives become actively interested in the idea of time and are curious about its extension in both directions, the future and the past. They are intrigued with the thought of themselves as infants and come to realize that even their parents were once children, that their grandmother was actually the mother of their own mother. This understanding of the future can be used to help them take more responsibility about the care of their health, from brushing teeth to the doctor's inoculations.

School-age children engage in developing time lines. They apply their expanding ability to think in quantitative terms to the measurement of time: clock time, dinosaur time, the olden days, and even the daily schedule. They become more responsible and concerned about being "on time." Ancestors and great, great, great, great grandparents begin to take their places in history. Decisions and speculations about their own personal future move gradually from pure fantasy to realistic possibilities.

By adolescence, the concept of time has the adult level of abstraction. Teenagers' thoughts about their own personal future can be an intense -- and often private -- preoccupation, making them vulnerable to despair as well as organizing the motivations and choices which are central to the formation of identity.

The developing concept of time plays a strategic part in the process of socialization. The adult's message of impulse control is that immediate gratification must be postponed for the sake of future rewards. (If you smash it, you won't have it to play with tomorrow.) Frustration must be endured, frustration becomes acceptable, for the sake of long-range goals. The ability to delay, anticipate, and plan are intrinsic to

establishing personal relationships. The essence of cause-and-effect thinking is the projection of an effect into the future. ("If I do 'X', then my friend will do 'Y'.") Playmates who last over time, who share a common past and anticipate a common future, become friends.

Preparing for the future lies at the core of education. Education uses an orientation to the future to motivate children to learn. Learning makes sense because it will help you do things that are desirable, will enable you to be independent or to hold a job. Children keep trying, children practice, for that someday of easy accomplishment and mastery.

As we adults represent the future to children, use an orientation to the future to motivate them to learn and help them gain control over impulsive behavior, we come face to face with the question of how we, ourselves, feel about the future. Do we have confidence in a stable, secure, trustworthy, predictable future, or is the future filled with doubts, uncertainty, even dread? How are we dealing with the reality -- unique to our generation -- that our society has the technological capacity to destroy the entire planet, that our government in the name of defense is actively enhancing that capability?

Last fall, in child development and educational circles, an extensive debate occurred over whether or not children should watch the national TV production, "The Day After," a dramatic portrayal of nuclear devastation. Should children be protected from such images? Should they be allowed to watch and then helped to understand? Can we offer the children the reassurance that a lot of people all over the world are working to make sure this never happens? How old should children be? The discussion guidelines developed by Educators for Social Responsibility (1) made a major contribution to this national debate.

Quite apart, however, from the discussion of whether children should or should not know about the nuclear threat, an impressive body of research by psychologists, psychiatrists, and educators is providing evidence that children do know. This knowledge appears in their questions, their drawings, their nightmares, and in the children's joke, "What are you going to be, if you grow up?"

Sybil Escalona's (2) first research was done in 1965, at the time of the Cuban crisis, air raid drills, and the bomb shelter controversy. She used a questionnaire that carefully avoided any reference to the bomb. It asked children, age four to adolescence, "Think about the world as it may be about ten years from now. What are some of the ways in which it may be different from today?" A relatively large proportion, including some first, second, and third graders, expressed pessimism about the future. The bomb and the possibility of nuclear war were spontaneously mentioned by more than 70%. The children spoke in terms of wholesale destruction or described a gruesome existence underground.

These children of the middle 60's have become the young parents of the 80's. I have come to know some members of this generation in our workshop, "Parenting in the Nuclear Age," which has been going on in the Parenting Department at Booth Maternity Center for almost two years. The childhood memories that these parents share often confirm those early fears. Some of the parents had grave doubts about bringing children into such an uncertain world. Others, confronted by the commitment to the future that an infant brings, suffered bouts of despair. A mother with a three-month-old baby said, "In just 18 years, my son will have to register for the draft. I think about it all the time. I hold him and cry."

The comments of the high-school students whom Beardslee and Mack (3) interviewed in 1978-1980 also demonstrate awareness of the threat of nuclear annihilation. Forty percent of the 1,000 students questioned indicated that they knew about the nuclear bomb before they were twelve. They believed a nuclear war was either possible or likely and that they would not survive it. These anxieties influenced their plans for marriage and children. Cynicism, sadness, a sense of helplessness, distrust of the future and of the adult world were expressed:

"All this has shown me how stupid some adults can be. If they know it could easily kill them, I have no idea why they support it."

"The thought has crossed my mind, 'Do I want to spend seven years of my life in dark corners, studying to be somebody, or do I want to be that somebody very quickly, while there is still time?'"

"If those bombs were dropped, what I'd like to do is, I would like to be vaporized. I couldn't bear to be on Earth if that happened. I couldn't bear to be alive."

A recurrent theme is a sense of injustice: Adults have had their chance to grow up, we want ours. A fifteen-year-old said, "These are old men with their fingers on the button, and they're playing with our lives which we haven't had yet, while they've had long, full ones. It makes me mad."

For some adolescents, the theme of adults having had their chance has become a reason for action. The reasoning seems to be: The adults have failed, so we are going to have to do it. It was an adolescent girl who organized the Children's Crusade for Nuclear Disarmament, an appeal for children to write letters to the president. Within less than a year, she had received more than 5,000 letters. Unable to negotiate an

opportunity to present them to any delegated representative of the administration, she decided on the action of standing in front of the White House and reading the letters. Their messages are eloquent, urgent, and persuasive:

"Dear Mr Reagan, I think you should have all the nuclear weapons taken apart the way you put them together, and don't say you can't because we all know nothing is impossible. And because if you can get those brilliant scientists to build one, I think you could disable one."

The appeals are logical: "Dear Mr Reagan, if you set the bombs off, you wouldn't have anybody to be president of."

It is my belief that it is just this kind of urgent, naive, emotional demand to live, the furious insistence on the right to have a future, that we as adults need to listen to. These voices will help us overcome the tendency to deny, avoid the issue, and rationalize away the threat. The habit of trusting government runs deep. The faith in experts, the fear of alienating friends, the reluctance to enter into the technical maze of the deterrence arguments, are hard barriers to overcome. But we, as representatives of the future, know that the future has a meaning and a responsibility that it never had before. And how else can we transcend the contradiction of preparing our children for a future that may never exist?

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